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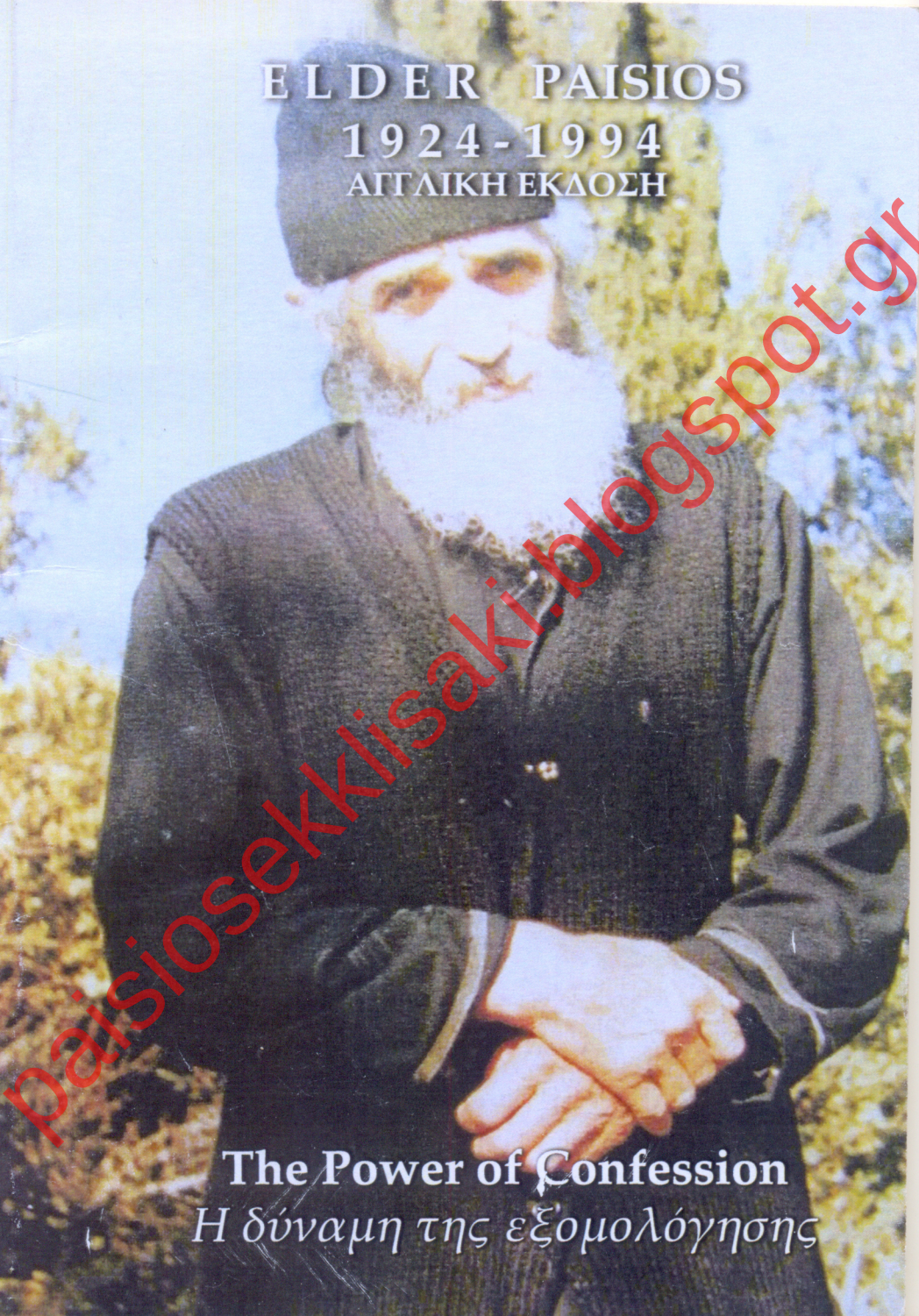

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The Power of Confession
Η δύναμη της εξομολόγησης

"Η δυναμη της εξομολογήσεως"

PART FIVE

THE POWER OF CONFESSION

"For someone to find peace,
he must discard the rubbish from within.
This will happen through Confession.
By opening his heart to his Spiritual Father
and confessing his transgressions,
a person is humbled. This opens the gate
to Heaven, bringing abundantly
the Grace of God and setting man free."

α) Για μια σωστή εξομολόγηση

β) Ο πνευματικός ιατρός της ψυχής

γ) Η εργασία του πνευματικού στις ψυχές

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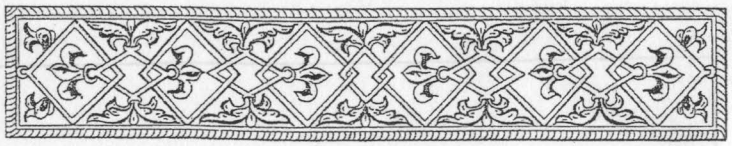

"Η ανάγκη πνευματικού οδηγού"

CHAPTER ONE

The Need for a Spiritual Guide

Man Is Redeemed Through Confession

Geronda, in the early years of Christianity, the Christians practised public confession. Does this help?

– The early years of Christianity were quite different from the present day. Public confession is not advised today.

– Why, Geronda? Were believers back then more zealous?

– Not only were they more zealous back then, they also didn't suffer from what people suffer today. Nowadays, couples separate at the slightest setback; things aren't what they used to be. People have drifted away from the Mystery of Repentance and Confession, drowning in their thoughts and passions. So many people come to me asking for help in their problems, but they don't go to Confession or to Church! "Do you ever go to Church?" I ask them. "No," they tell me. "Have you ever gone to Confession?" "No. I came to you to make me well." "But

how am I going to do this? You have to repent of your sins and transgressions and confess them; you have to go to Church; you have to receive Holy Communion when your Spiritual Father gives you his blessing; and I also will pray for you to get well. Are you forgetting that there is another life ahead and we need to prepare ourselves for it?" "Look, Father, all these thing you say about Church, the other life, and so on, don't concern me. They're fairy tales. I've been to magicians, to psychics and they haven't been able to heal me. I've heard that you can heal me." Now, how can you put some sense into such a person? You talk to them about Confession, about the future life, and they tell you that such things are "fairy tales"; but on the other hand they insist, "Help me, I'm on drugs." But how can I help them? They expect to be healed magically.

And even though their problems are caused by their sins, many of them don't go to a Spiritual Father for help, but instead they resort to "confessing" to psychologists, where they tell their story and receive advice for their problems. For example, if they have to cross a river, the psychologist throws them into it, and they either drown or swim to the shore; but is it the right shore! However, if they go and confess their sins to a Spiritual Father, they will cross over to the other side without difficulty by using the bridge, because the Grace of God, through the Mystery of Repentance and Confession, works on the soul and they are redeemed.

– Geronda, some people say, "We don't go to Confession because we can't find any good Spiritual Fathers."

– These are excuses. Every Spiritual Father possesses divine authority when he is wearing his clerical stole. He

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performs the Mystery of Repentance and Confession and has divine Grace. When he reads the prayer of forgiveness, God erases the sins confessed in sincere repentance. It is up to us how much we are going to be helped by the Mystery of Confession. Someone with psychological problems came to my *Kalyvi* once, thinking that I had the gift of insight and would be able to help him. "What do you foresee for me?" he asked me. I told him, "Go find a Spiritual Father to whom you must confess on a regular basis, and this will help you sleep soundly each night without the use of drugs." "There are no good Spiritual Fathers today," he said, "There were in the old days." You see, they come with good intentions and hopes of being healed, but they don't accept what you tell them. They've just wasted the fare here.

But I also see a new craftiness of the devil. He causes people to think that if they make a vow to God and fulfil it, if they go on some pilgrimage, then they are all right spiritually. You see hordes of people going to monasteries and shrines with tall candles and extravagant offerings, ostentatiously making the sign of the cross, even weeping a little, and feeling content. They do not repent, do not confess, do not correct or change their way of life… and this is quite pleasing to the devil.

– Geronda, can a person who does not confess feel at peace with himself?

– How can he be at peace? For one to find peace, he must discard the rubbish from within. This will happen through repentance and confession. By opening his heart to his Spiritual Father and confessing his transgressions, a person is humbled. This opens the gate to Heaven, bringing abundantly the Grace of God and setting man free.

Before confession, man is surrounded by fog, blurring his vision and causing him to justify his mistakes. For when the mind is darkened by sins, one cannot see clearly. Confession dispels the fog and clears the horizon. This is why when someone who has never been to confession comes to me to talk about something or to seek my advice, I always send him first to confession before he comes to me for a spiritual discussion. Some of them say, "Geronda, you understand what I need to do about a particular situation, so just tell me." But I tell them, "It is not enough for me to understand what you must do; you, too, must be able to understand what I'll tell you, and you won't be able to do that without confession. So go first and make your Confession and then come to talk with me." I mean, how is it possible to effectively communicate with a person who is on a different frequency?

Through confession, a person discards everything that is useless within and becomes spiritually fruitful. One day I was digging in my garden to plant a few tomatoes. Right then someone came and said to me, "What are you doing, Geronda?" "Well, I am confessing my garden," I told him. Puzzled at my remark, he asked, "Does a garden need confessing, too?" "Of course it does! I have discovered that when I confess it, that is, when I remove the rocks, the weeds, the briars, and so on, it then produces healthy vegetables; otherwise the tomatoes are yellowish and sickly!"

God Wants Man to Be Corrected by Man

– Geronda, when I'm facing a problem and pray for it, how will I know what the will of God is?

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– The will of God is not found this way. It is better to ask someone else about a particular problem you may have. Do not seek to be informed by God when you can receive advice and guidance from another person; because if you try to be informed directly by God, you may be misled. Someone used to go to a Church and stand in front of the iconostasis to pray: "My *Panaghia*, can I take the money from the box?" The thought raced through his mind, "Take it." And then he'd tell himself, "Yes, I will take the money." This went on several times, until one of the church stewards realised that church money was missing. He decided to watch, to see what was happening. Soon enough, the same person showed up again and started the same routine: "My *Panaghia*, can I take the money from the box? ... Yes, I will take it." And just as he was taking the money, the warden caught him in the act.

When you find a spiritual person whom you can talk to about something, you should always seek advice from him. If you are somewhere where there is no one to talk to, let's say you're in the desert alone, but you have the thirst for obedience inside, then the Good God Himself will become the Elder who will enlighten and inform you. Let us suppose that you cannot find someone to explain to you a particular passage in the Sacred Scripture. God will enlighten you to understand it.

– Geronda, how can we understand whether something that happens in our spiritual struggle stems from temptation or is a result of our own carelessness?

– One must go and ask.

– Do you mean that one cannot come to understand it on his own?

– Even if one were to understand something on his

own, he wouldn't be certain. Even an experienced person will often go and ask someone else. For some personal matter, I always ask. When I'm dealing with a personal matter, I consider my own solution to be foolish, even if it is wiser. And I don't go to someone who knows what will put me at ease; I go to someone who doesn't know. You see, even a doctor who wants to be certain that he has made the proper diagnosis will consult another doctor in difficult cases, so you see how much more an intern should do that! No matter how spiritual a person is and how well he may take care of his personal affairs on his own, he still won't be entirely at peace with that because God wants man to be helped by another person, be corrected by another person. The Good God works things out in this manner so a person may become humble. One must reveal his thoughts and his problems, his inner state to his Spiritual Father; he should seek his advice and not decide on his own when it comes to difficult matters. He shouldn't confront alone the difficulties in his spiritual struggle by "practicing medicine" on himself, because the tempter, the devil, can confuse him and cause him problems. Some people will even go as far as to impose a rule of penance upon themselves; such a thing is very dangerous.

One who does not have a Spiritual Father as an advisor on his spiritual journey will get confused, weary, delayed and will find it hard to reach his destination. No matter how wise he may be, if he comes up with solutions to his problems on his own, he will remain in darkness, for he proceeds with self-confidence and pride. But one who is humble goes to his Spiritual Father and asks for his opinion and guidance and is greatly helped. God

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will certainly enlighten the Spiritual Father to provide the right answer. I have noticed that when someone comes to me with devotion, with the thought that I am a saint, when in fact I am nothing but a tin can, that I feel an inner transformation, and that the things I say to them are not my own. This is how I understand clearly that the person before me has come to me with true devotion; and God, in order not to disappoint him, gives me this good condition. In such cases, if it is a serious matter, God informs you, and you can tell the person what will happen, when it will happen and how to cope with the situation.

The Spiritual Life Requires a Spiritual Guide

The most necessary thing today is for people to find a Spiritual Father, to confess, trust him and follow his advice. If people have a spiritual guide and establish a rule of prayer and study, if they go to Church on a regular basis and receive Holy Communion, then they have nothing to fear in this life.

The soul must be attended to closely by the Spiritual Father so that it does not go astray. Spiritual study certainly helps in our struggle for the spiritual life, but if we are without a spiritual guide, we can easily give our own interpretations to what is being studied and fall into error. For example, when someone is going on a long trip and is not certain of the way, he can consult the map but he can also stop and ask for directions. Let's say that someone is travelling from Athens to Florina. He has a map to follow, but along the way, he may stop to ask at a kiosk if he is going in the right direction, because he could take a

wrong turn at an intersection and end up in Kavala or at a dangerous cliff. Of course, it is also quite possible for one not to follow the directions he is given, and end up somewhere else, or he may not pay close attention to the dangers he was warned about, and be harmed. But whoever shows him the way and warns him, "Be careful, there's a sharp turn over there and a dangerous cliff over here...", will have his reward. My point is that the same thing must be done in the spiritual life. The believer has to have a Spiritual Father, be guided by his advice and be helped through the Mystery of Repentance and Confession. This is the only way for one to live an Orthodox Christian life and be certain that he is on the right path.

Of course, one should choose his spiritual guide carefully and not entrust his soul to just anyone. Just as one seeks the best doctor for his physical health, he should also seek out a good Spiritual Father for his spiritual health, and go to him, the doctor of his soul, on a regular basis.

Refer People to a Spiritual Father

– Geronda, often when people see us Sisters dressed in a cassock, they tell us their pain, their problems, even their confession. What should we do?

– First of all, when they come to you to talk about their problem, you should ask them whether they have a Spiritual Father. This is what I tell people who come to me at the *Kalyvi* to ask me about something: "I am not a Father confessor; go to your Spiritual Father and do what he tells you." In order to renounce the devil, people must repent and have a Spiritual Father to confess to. Of

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course, I understand it if a Nun sits and listens to a pained woman; but afterwards, she must advise her to go to her Spiritual Father. And she must not go on talking with her. And if a woman is not at peace with her Spiritual Father or is in despair, or she has never confessed before, the Nun may listen to her once, but then she must send her to the Spiritual Father, assuring her that she will continue to pray for her.

Aside from the fact that it is not a nun's responsibility to help people in this way, that is, by constantly listening to their problems, it also doesn't help them. For it is true to say that a person can suffer three forms of transformations: from himself, from others and from the devil. People come to the Monastery, find some human consolation, but once they leave to go home, they resume their own ways and start the same things all over again. Both women and men should go to their Spiritual Father. It isn't right for them to tell their problems to a Nun, for then they will say, "I made my confession, I'm all right" and, having eased their conscience, they won't go to a Spiritual Father. This is a machination of the devil to prevent them from going to confession.

You must come to understand your real mission as nuns and not presume to do missionary work when you have yet to understand your monastic mission. Being monastic people, we have the responsibility of praying for the problems of others; but we are not responsible for getting ourselves involved in their problems. The Spiritual Father, on the other hand, has the obligation to do this; he also carries the responsibility: he must answer before God. If they discuss their problems with you, a nun, they will burden you with the responsibility, whereas

the Spiritual Father is able to follow their life closely and provide solutions to their problems. In other words, this requires ongoing work. This is not the work of monks and nuns. People should only ask for prayer from us. Let them send us a letter with the names of people so that we may pray for them with the *komboschoini*.

A Spiritual Father Must Be Nearby

Just as one takes care to have his family doctor available as nearby as possible, he should also have his Spiritual Father near him. A doctor who is near his patient can be more effective in helping him than a more experienced university professor would be, simply because he can follow the patient's condition regularly and systematically and, when necessary, send him to a specialist. During my stay at the Sanatorium,[1] I was impressed by the following: Many wealthy people who suffered from tuberculosis stayed at home, and medical professors would go make house calls. But such treatment proved totally ineffective, simply because they could not follow their patients closely. As a result, they created a separate unit at the Sanatorium for them, so they could be hospitalized there and be followed systematically.

The point I'm trying to make is this: just as a doctor needs to closely observe the patient after initiating some treatment, to see if it is effective or is having adverse effects, so that he can accordingly increase or decrease the dosage and – if necessary – even change the treatment,

1. At the Sanatorium in Thessaloniki, in 1966, the Elder had a lung operation because he was suffering from *bronchiectasis*.

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so the Spiritual Father, in order to provide effective help, must also be able to follow the soul closely, because it can undergo various changes and reactions undetectable from a distance. Once I said to a woman who had a certain temptation, "You must do this, and you will see that you'll be able to overcome it." Indeed, she followed my instructions and overcame the temptation. After some time she had another, completely different temptation which she confronted in the same way and suffered difficulties! The blessed soul could have sent someone or written to ask me what to do in this new difficulty; I would have given her different medicine, that is, different advice. She found it difficult to ask me because I was far away. This is why I do not usually give advice from a distance if I don't know the person well and don't have a close communication with him.

The Spiritual Father in the Family

– Geronda, what books can help married couples?

– One thing that can help a married couple is for each spouse not to justify himself or herself. If spouses justify themselves, they receive no benefit, no matter how many spiritual books they read. If they have a good disposition, if they have a Spiritual Father and obey him, they will not have problems. But it can't be done without a spiritual referee.

It is best that the spouses have the same Spiritual Father; not one for the husband and another for the wife. When two pieces of wood are planed by two different carpenters, they never fit. Whereas when the couple has the same Spiritual Father, he will plane down the rough spots

– the shortcomings – of both spouses, and the difficulties will be removed. But today, even couples who otherwise live a spiritual life often have different Spiritual Fathers. Rarely do spouses have the same Spiritual Father, and this is why they aren't helped effectively. I know married couples who were compatible but ended up divorcing because they did not have the same Spiritual Father to help them, while others, who were not compatible but had the same Spiritual Father, were able to live their whole life together harmoniously.

Of course, if the whole family has the same Spiritual Father, this is even better. The Spiritual Father will be able to listen to all the members of the family and counsel them accordingly on a given subject. Sometimes he will be stern with the father or the mother; other times he will talk to the children, if he cannot draw a conclusion from what the parents have to say. Or, if the couple has problems, and the wife, for example, is at fault, then he can call on the husband and advise him on how he should behave. He may even ask a relative or a friend to provide help discreetly.

Changing Spiritual Fathers

– Geronda, when someone has to change Spiritual Father, is it necessary for him to confess anew his sins which had been confessed previously?

– In order to be helped more effectively, it's good to inform the new Spiritual Father, just as a patient will inform a new doctor of his medical history.

– Geronda, when someone wants to change Spiritual Father and asks us if it's proper, what should we say?

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– You should tell him to first receive the blessing of his present Spiritual Father. It is not a good thing to readily change your Spiritual Father. A building will never be constructed right if the engineers and the builders are constantly shuffled.

In the old days, people would go to the Elders to seek advice on a matter that concerned them and be helped. Nowadays, many people do not go for the purpose of advice; they go in order to justify themselves or to say that they have also consulted some Elder. Someone will say, "I went to see so and so, and even consulted with Father Paisios," when I may have reprimanded him, or he merely came to the door and did not even knock! They end up going around from one Spiritual Father to the other without having a permanent one, and they become confused.

Others commit a sin, and instead of going to their own Spiritual Father for confession, they go to someone else so they won't lose their dignity. After a while they repeat the same fault and go to another Spiritual Father, and then to another, and they appear to each Spiritual Father as having committed this fault only once, thus continuing to commit the same sin and remaining uncorrected.

I've also noticed some who avoid saying something to their Spiritual Father – even though they know that by doing so they will be helped and confidentiality will surely be maintained – and they go and tell it to some acquaintance of theirs who not only can't help them but will surely tell it to someone else. I remember when I was a beginner monk in the Coenobium,[2] someone had come to live the coenobitic life there. He stayed for a while and

2. At the Holy Monastery of Esphigmenou on Mount Athos, 1953-1956.

then had thoughts of leaving. He did not go to the abbot with his thoughts, or to any other Spiritual Father, but he did tell them to a worker from Ierissos who was working in the monastery. I was peeling onions outside the kitchen nearby when he was telling him this. He started "confessing" aloud from a distance of six feet to the worker: "I have regretted becoming a monk." "Didn't you test your vocation as a novice when you came?" the worker asked. "I did, for two years." "Well then, why didn't you leave sooner?" "Well, I didn't." "Were you forced to become a monk?" "No, I wanted to become a monk." Finally, the worker added, "Have you told the abbot?" "No," the monk answered. "How can you be helped by telling these things to me and not to your abbot?" the worker asked in wonder. You see, the young monk had told his whole story to the wrong person. He did not go to make his confession to the abbot, who would have helped him, but instead went to the worker. The worker in turn might tell the story during the weekend at the coffee shop for a laugh, and the whole village would be talking about it. And you can't say that he had a screw loose; he was well educated and even spoke ancient Greek fluently.

– Geronda, can a layperson ask a spiritual brother about a problem or a certain temptation of his, when his own Spiritual Father is absent?

– Can't he telephone his Spiritual Father? A brother sometimes can help and other times he can't, or in spite of his good intentions, may even do harm. A telephone call to the Spiritual Father at a time of need can take care of the problem. And if he can't communicate with his Spiritual Father and the matter is serious and urgent, let him ask another Spiritual Father. It is wise to have asked

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his Spiritual Father in advance to recommend another Spiritual Father of the same spirit, one who can be contacted when such circumstances arise. For every mechanic has his own plan of action. One plan may be as good as the other, but it is a different plan.

"Για μια εξομολόγηση"

CHAPTER TWO

For an Effective Confession

Let Us Bind Our Wounds

Geronda, when I fall during my spiritual struggle, I panic.

– Do not fear. It's a struggle, it's real warfare, and we're bound to suffer some wounds. But they're healed through confession. You see, when soldiers are wounded in the course of a battle, they rush to the doctor, he binds their wounds, and they courageously return to the battlefield. In the meantime, they gain experience through their wounds, become more capable of protecting themselves, and avoid getting wounded again. The same holds true for us; when wounded in our spiritual struggle, we mustn't be discouraged. Instead, we should rush to the doctor – our Spiritual Father – show him our wounds, be spiritually healed and continue the *good fight*.[1] It's bad when we don't search out the fierce enemies of the soul – the passions – and don't struggle to cast them out.

1. 1 Tim 6:12.

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– Geronda, some people refuse to go to confession out of *philotimo*. They reason, "Since it's possible that I might commit the same sin again, why should I go to confess it? Just to fool the priest?"

– That's not right! It's like a wounded soldier saying, "Since the war isn't over yet and I could be wounded again, why should I have my wound taken care of now?" But he will bleed to death if he doesn't bind his wound. Some may not go to confession out of *philotimo*, but in the end, they are rendered useless. You see, the devil will take advantage even of our gifts and talents. If we don't cleanse our soul through confession when we fall and sully ourselves – reasoning that we will fall and sully ourselves again – we just pile new mud onto old mud, making the cleaning process all the more difficult.

The Need For Confession

– Geronda, Saint Mark the Ascetic says, *The man who possesses spiritual knowledge and understands the truth confesses to God, not by recalling what he has done, but by accepting patiently what comes.*[2] What does he mean?

– He means that both things need to be done. The believer confesses to the Spiritual Father, but he also humbly confesses prior to his prayer to God by baring his soul and saying, "My God, I have erred, I am a sinner, I have committed this sin, that sin..." And at the same time, he will accept his sorrows as being therapeutic. The Saint

2. See Saint Mark the Ascetic, *On Those Who Think That They Are Made Righteous by Works*, ch. 155, The *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, p. 138, tr. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, ed. Faber and Faber, 1979.

is not telling us to avoid the first and the second confession – he's telling us to endure patiently the sorrows that come to us. What do we mean when we say in Greek *exomologoumai* (I confess)? Doesn't it mean "I reveal to the outside what I have inside me?" If you hold good things inside, *you will confess unto the Lord*[3] –, that is, you will glorify and praise God. But if you have bad things in you, you will confess your sins.

– Geronda, when someone goes to confession for the first time, should he speak to his Spiritual Father about his entire life?

– The first time he should make a general confession. It is like the patient who enters a hospital and gives his medical history, for example by saying, "I had a lung ailment, but now it has been healed; I had an operation with local or general anaesthesia", and so on. We do the same thing in our first confession, we tell the Spiritual Father details of our life, and he will diagnose the ailment and try to heal it. Many times, an injury that we pay no attention to will bring us consequences later. Of course, the first time we go to our Spiritual Father, we might have to confess one hundred sins, let's say. The second time we go, we may have one hundred and ten sins to confess, because the devil will intensify his attack since he sees we have gone to Confession and have begun to destroy his influence upon us. The third time we go, we may have a hundred and fifty, but then the number will start to fall, to the point where eventually we will be going to confession with only a very few sins to confess.

3. Cf. Ps 107:1 (Ps 106:1 LXX).

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Proper Confession

– Why is it that sometimes, even though our conscience is censuring us, we do not undertake the necessary struggle to correct ourselves?

– This can happen because of some trauma of the soul. When someone is panic-stricken by a temptation, he wants to struggle, but feels paralysed, or too weak to resist; he lacks the will power, the inner power of the soul. That's when he must seek Confession in order to find inner peace. With Confession one is consoled, revivified, and by the Grace of God draws the strength to return to the battle. If one does not put his spiritual life in order, he may be attacked with even more temptations and, despondent as he already is, may become even more broken in spirit and feel overwhelmed by thoughts; he despairs and feels unable to struggle at all.

– What if this happens often?

– If this happens often, one must often seek refuge in Confession, by opening his heart to the Spiritual Father and receiving encouragement. And once he found peace within his soul, he must let the engine run, he must struggle vigorously with *philotimo* in order to put the devil to flight.

– Geronda, what is going on when I feel I don't need confession?

– Could it be that you are not carefully observing your inner life? Confession is a mystery. You should go and simply tell your sins. After all, what do you think of yourself? Have you no stubbornness? Have you no egoism? Don't you hurt your Sister's feelings? Don't you criticise? What do you suppose I go to confess? "I got

angry, I criticised...", and the priest reads the prayer of forgiveness. But even the small sins have their own collective weight themselves. When I used to go to Father Tychon[4] for Confession, I wouldn't have anything serious to confess and he would advise me, "There is sand, my son, there is sand!" The little sins accumulate and add up to make a sand dune that is heavier than any single big stone. Someone who has committed one big sin thinks of it all the time, repents and is humbled. You have a myriad of small sins. But if you examine the conditions under which you were raised, and the conditions under which the other person was raised, you will see that you are worse off spiritually than the other person. You must also try to be specific in your confession. It is not enough to simply say, for example, "I am jealous, I get angry, and so on," but you should relate the actual and specific sin in order to be helped. And when it is a very serious sin, such as cunning, you must give details of how you thought and how you actually acted. Otherwise, you are merely trying to mock Christ. When a person does not confess the truth to the Spiritual Father, who therefore in turn cannot point out his error to help him, he ends up being harmed all the more, in the same way as the patient who hides his symptoms and his disease from the doctor. Whereas when the penitent opens himself honestly, as he really is, then the Spiritual Father can get to know him better and help him more effectively and positively.

Also, when someone has been unjust or has injured some other person with his behaviour, he must first go to that person and ask humbly for forgiveness, reconcilia-

4. See Elder Paisios, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters*, pp. 25-55.

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tion, and then go to confess his fall to the Spiritual Father and receive remission for his sin. This is how the Grace of God comes to us. If one confesses his sin to the Spiritual Father without first having asked for forgiveness from the injured person, he cannot find peace in his soul because he has not yet humbled himself. An exception can be made when the injured person has died or cannot be located because he has changed his residence and there is no address available to ask, even in writing, for forgiveness. But, if he has the desire, every good intention of doing this, then God will recognise this and forgive him.

– Geronda, what happens when we ask someone for forgiveness, and are not forgiven?

– Then we must pray for God to soften the heart of the injured person. But there is also the possibility that God has not softened the injured person's heart, because, should we be forgiven, we may just as carelessly fall into the same sin.

– Geronda, when someone falls into a serious sin, is there a possibility that he may not be able to confess it immediately?

– Why should he put it off? To let it turn even more sour? The longer you keep something spoiled, the more it spoils. Why allow two or three months to pass before going to the Spiritual Father to confess it? The sooner one goes, the better. If you have an open wound, will you let a month go by before tending to it? Nor should one wait to go until the Spiritual Father has more time, to be more at ease. That one serious sin should be confessed immediately, and then when the Spiritual Father has more time, the person can go back again for a longer visit, for a more detailed talk.

It doesn't take long to provide my Spiritual Father with a picture of myself. When the conscience is working correctly, a person can give a true picture of himself in a few words. But when there is confusion in his soul, he can say a lot without ever revealing an image of himself. For instance, I see some people who write whole notebooks, a twenty or thirty-page report written in small letters and several pages of post-scripts, all of which could have been put down on just one page.

Excuses in Our Confession Are Burdens on Our Conscience

– Geronda, when during the confession of a sin, one does not feel the same pain he felt when he committed the sin, does this mean that there is no real repentance?

– If a long time has passed since the sin was committed, the wound is somewhat healed and this is why one doesn't feel the same pain. The important thing to watch out for, is to avoid justifying ourselves during our confession. When I go to make my confession and say, for example, "I got angry", – even though it may have been necessary to slap someone – I don't mention this extenuating circumstance in order to avoid the possibility of being justified before the Spiritual Father. A person who confesses and at the same time justifies himself doesn't find inner peace no matter how unscrupulous he may be. The excuses he brings into his confession become burdens on his conscience. Whereas he who exaggerates his faults because he has a refined conscience, and accepts a heavy rule from the Spiritual Father, experiences ineffable delight. There are people who, for example, if they

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steal one single grape, will feel as if they have stolen many baskets of grapes and are constantly thinking of their mistake. They can't sleep all night until they have confessed. While others, who have stolen many baskets of grapes, justify themselves and say, that they only took one single bunch. But those who not only do not justify themselves but also magnify their smallest fault and worry and suffer much over one minor infraction, they experience immense divine consolation. This is where one can see divine righteousness in action, and how the Good God gives His rewards.

I have noticed that those who confess their faults humbly to the Spiritual Father and debase themselves, shine because they receive the Grace of God. A war veteran narrated to me with great distress what he had done when he was eight years old. He had taken a ball from another child for just one night – having returned it the next day – and he cried over this because he had saddened that child. When he was discharged from the military, he looked up and found all those he had somehow grieved while serving in the military – even during the line of duty – and asked for their forgiveness! Now, this impressed me! He took it all upon himself; he considered all the faults as his own. He now lives in a village and gives away his money as charity. He also takes care of his elderly mother, who is ninety-five years old and bedridden with paralysis and, because he sees her body when he takes care of her, he is troubled by the thought, "If Ham who saw the nakedness of his father was punished,[5] what about me?" He was constantly weeping. His face

5. Cf. Gen 9:20-27.

was transformed. How much I learned from his contrite spirit!

– Geronda, can someone magnify his mistakes merely in order to show that he is doing refined spiritual work?

– That is another matter; in this case one becomes proud of his humility.

After Confession

– Geronda, after Confession, is it right to feel weighed down?

– Why should you feel weighed down? With one proper confession, the past is wiped clean. A new chapter is opened. The Grace of God comes and man is transformed completely. Agitation, wildness, anxiety disappear, and serenity and calmness prevail. So obvious even externally is this transformation that I tell some people to take a picture of themselves before and after their confession so they can see for themselves the good transformation; the inner spiritual state is reflected in the face. The Mysteries of the Church can work miracles. The closer one comes to Jesus Christ the God-Man, the more he becomes deified, and it is to be expected that he will shine, and be betrayed to others by divine Grace.

– In other words, Geronda, does one feel joy immediately following a sincere confession?

– Not always. He may not feel joy at once, but gradually joy is born inside him. Following confession, one should have a *philotimo*-filled acknowledgement of what has happened. One must feel like the person who has been forgiven a great debt he owed, and out of *philotimo* feels a sense of gratitude and obligation toward his

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benefactor. You must be thankful to God, but at the same time, you must have this verse of the Psalm in mind: *For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me*,[6] in order to remain humble and prevent growing too bold and repeating the same faults.

– Geronda, I read somewhere that the demons will accuse and torment us in the other life even for a single evil thought that we failed to confess.

– Look, when you truly repent and confess to the Spiritual Father everything that you remember without having any intention of hiding anything, it is finished; the demons have no authority whatsoever over you. But when certain sins are intentionally not confessed, then yes, one will be tormented in the other life for these.

– Geronda, when someone has confessed certain faults and sins committed during his youth but recalls them over and over again and is tormented, is this appropriate?

– If someone feels contrition for the sins of his youth and has already confessed them, there is no reason to be troubled over them, since God has forgiven him from the moment he confessed. Henceforth, one should not dig up and dwell on old things, particularly carnal sins, because one can thus be greatly harmed. During a war, for example, a hand grenade falls next to a soldier, but God protects him and it doesn't explode. After the war, the soldier finds the hand grenade which didn't explode and begins to scrutinise it, and finally is blown to smithereens during peacetime.

6. Ps 51:3 (Ps 50:5 LXX).

Trusting the Spiritual Father

– Geronda, if someone becomes very upset because the Spiritual Father has reprimanded him over some fault, and then feels great sadness, does this contain hidden egoism?

– Of course it does; this contains egoism too. But if he repents according to the will of God, he will find consolation, he will make spiritual progress, for he will try to avoid repeating the same mistake. But he must share his difficulties, his thoughts, his falls with the Spiritual Father and joyfully accept both his mild and his strict behaviour, for all things are done out of love and concern for the progress of his soul.

– But, Geronda, what if I don't accept his reprimand or his directive?

– If you don't accept it, you will remain uncorrected. Those who do not accept advice even from those who love them will finally remain useless persons without any spiritual benefit, through their own fault. Like the wooden boards that do not accept the planning of the carpenter so as to become fine furniture, but instead end up being used in concrete moulds or on scaffolding to be walked on and made muddy, until in the end they are thrown into the fire, so also such people will in the end be destroyed.

– Geronda, when someone disagrees with his Spiritual Father on something, what must he do?

– He must simply and humbly tell his thought. Of course, great care and attention is needed in selecting a Spiritual Father whom you can trust and be at peace with his spiritual guidance.

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– Geronda, is it beneficial to insist on your own opinion when you see something differently from the Spiritual Father?

– No, because you can't fully know what is hidden behind what you consider incorrect. For example, for one to fully understand what is behind a certain action of his Spiritual Father, the Spiritual Father may have to reveal the confession of another. Is it ever permitted to reveal the confession of another? Absolutely not! Let's say that you've agreed with the Spiritual Father to see you at a specific time, but another person comes with suicidal thoughts and so he takes that person first. Now you may think, "He took him first and is scorning me." But how can the Spiritual Father explain to you that the other person has thoughts of suicide? If he were to offer this explanation, he would be destroying the other person. On the other hand, if you are scandalised or feel slighted, well, this is not a matter of any serious consequence.

Once some people who came to the *Kalyvi* were scandalised in such a way. There was a man who, after a lot of prodding, was convinced by his family to come and talk with me, and I accepted him with joy. I kissed him, I gave him a *komboschoini* to say his prayers, as well as a small icon. The others who were there were scandalised. They said, "The Elder did not pay any attention to us." That poor fellow was a prodigal; I knew a few things about his life. He left us a changed man. Let others be scandalised a thousand times. You must not for the sake of putting one person at ease through a revealing explanation destroy another person who is going through far more serious issues.

The Proper Communication With the Spiritual Father

A spiritual person who wants to help someone tries to unite him with Christ and not with himself. He will rejoice when he succeeds in uniting him with Christ, and when that person in turn begins struggling on his own to remain with Christ. In this case, both have their reward; and things are progressing as they should, on a regular basis. However, when the person struggles with the aim of pleasing the one who is trying to unite him with Christ, that is, whether his own given action will please or displease his helper, and does not look to see how Christ Himself sees his action, then he pleases neither the person who helps him nor Christ; and he himself gains no benefit because he receives no divine help. In other words, neither Christ nor the Spiritual Father rejoices over what he is doing, while he himself is not helped in overcoming some difficulty. Let us suppose that a Sister is chanting in Church and is thinking, "I wonder, am I chanting well? Will the Abbess be pleased with me?" With such thoughts, the person will not be helped. Whereas if she chants for Christ, things will proceed accordingly; she will both chant well and please the Abbess.

– Geronda, if someone does not understand correctly what was said by the Spiritual Father, is he at fault?

– Look, if he did not understand because he had some desire and his mind was there, on the desire, then he is at fault. Some people make their desire to be the will of God. For example, someone seeks his Spiritual Father's advice on a problem, even though he himself already has a solution in mind that suits him. The Spiritual Father

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says what must be done, but the person understands that he was told to do what he already had in mind, and he does it joyfully, imagining also that he is doing it in obedience to the Spiritual Father. And if then the Spiritual Fathers asks, "Why did you act in this way?" he will respond, "Isn't this how you told me to act?"

But there are times that one shouldn't take literally what a Spiritual Father says, as it could just be a figure of speech. I will tell you of a particular case just to give you the idea. A 45-year-old female teacher, who was also a mother, became involved with a 16-year-old student of hers. The boy left home and went to live with her. When his father came to my *Kalyvi* and told me the story, I advised him to follow his Spiritual Father's advice. So, the poor fellow went to his Spiritual Father and came back to me later. That day I had with me the Exarchia of the Patriarchate[7] and was unable to discuss anything with him. I simply told him, "Do what your Spiritual Father tells you." He wouldn't leave – and fortunately, he didn't leave but insisted. At one point when I had a moment and saw him again, he told me, "Geronda, I have decided to kill that woman because that is what my Spiritual Father told me!" "Hold on here, my good man, what exactly did your Spiritual Father tell you?" "He told me, 'That woman deserves to be killed!'" Do you understand? The Spiritual Father only as a figure of speech said, "The woman deserves to be killed", not that she should be actually killed! From that time on, I never say to anyone,

7. Exarchia of the Patriarchate: The representatives of the Oecumenical Patriarchate.

"Do whatever your Spiritual Father tells you;" but, rather, I ask, "What did your Spiritual Father tell you to do?"

– Geronda, is it possible for someone to ask for help from a Spiritual Father and at the same time suggest a solution?

– Well, what kind of help is he asking for? It's one thing to humbly say to his Spiritual Father what he thinks will help him – it behoves him to say it – and quite another to insist that his thinking is correct. Then he can't progress spiritually. It's like going to the doctor and saying, "Give me this medicine." The patient is obligated to follow the doctor's directions; he himself can't prescribe what medicine he should be given. It's not a matter of appetite and taste as it is with food and pastries, when we can say, "I prefer pie or biscuit." The doctor will prescribe the medicine according to the illness he diagnosed.

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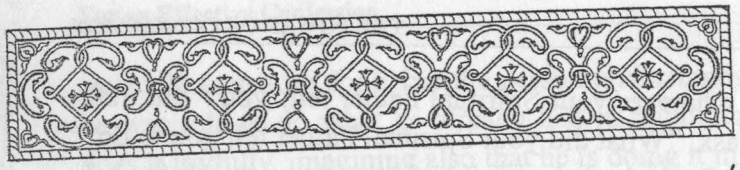

Ο πνευματικός ιατρός της ψυχής

CHAPTER THREE

The Spiritual Physician of the Soul

The Need For Good Spiritual Fathers

People today are weary, confused and darkened by sin and egoism. This is why there is a need, more than ever before, for good and experienced Spiritual Fathers, who will approach people with simplicity and true love, who will guide them with discernment so as to bring peace to their soul. Without good Spiritual Fathers, the Churches empty, while the psychiatric wards, prisons and hospitals become busier than ever. People need to realise that their life is troubled because they have distanced themselves from God; they need to realise that they must repent and humbly confess their sins.

The work of a Spiritual Father is inner therapy. There is no higher physician than an experienced Spiritual Father, one who inspires trust with his holiness, who removes from the sensitive creatures of God the thoughts brought by the devil, one who heals souls and bodies not with medications, but with the Grace of God.

A Spiritual Father, when he has divine enlightenment, the spirit of God, understands and discerns the situations

and is able to give correct directives to the soul. It is best that he doesn't have too many other responsibilities, so that he may be able to devote the necessary time to each soul and carry out his spiritual work fully and properly. Otherwise, he suffers just like a good surgeon who, having to perform many surgeries every day, is so exhausted that he's not very efficient in general. For this reason, the Spiritual Father doesn't have to be involved in every family matter, but rather should focus on what concerns one person at a time, so as to have the time to provide effective help. And the spiritual child must also not occupy the Spiritual Father with matters that can be resolved by other individuals who are more knowledgeable in those particular matters, such as what house they should rent or what school they should send a child to, and so forth.

Both the penitent and the Spiritual Father are judged in the Mystery of Repentance and Confession. Spiritual freedom is most helpful in guiding a soul. In other words, the Spiritual Father must not blindly follow a "spiritual course" that is imposed by others, but rather see what the Fathers of the Church say and act with discernment according to each individual, each fall, each repentance. However, I do notice that sometimes there is a lack of total sincerity and honesty. Some Spiritual Fathers are not completely sincere in what they say about people. Although they are responsible for souls, they don't bother to give someone who is involved, for example, with sorcerers or deceivers a word of advice to make him think a bit; they don't take a position on matters of importance, just to avoid having troubles because of them. In other words, for the sake of not disturbing our relationship with one person or another, and so that they will say

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good things about us, are we going to allow a person to be destroyed, and let the devil rejoice?

The Discernment and Experience of the Spiritual Father

– Geronda, in our times, with so much prevalent sin in the world, isn't the Spiritual Father's position rather difficult?

– Yes, it is difficult. This is why the Spiritual Father must first attempt to correct the most serious sins, until most of the sin is removed from the creatures of God, and they become more receptive to spiritual purity. He should show leniency, but at the same time guide the person to realise his faults and ask God for forgiveness. It is imperative that the Spiritual Father emphasise to the penitent that he must repent and change his way of life if he wishes to receive the mercy of God. It s also very helpful when the Spiritual Father speaks with love about the great love of God to man, so that they will be moved, on their own and, out of *philotimo*, to acknowledge their faults and change their habits.

A young Spiritual Father who is not yet very experienced should be involved in rather easy cases at first. For example, a difficult soul may undermine his spiritual progress by taking up too much of his time. If he is not careful, the well-meaning Spiritual Father will give his attention to the scenes made by such a difficult soul and will end up squandering his energy and being tormented. When he acquires experience, he will know when it's time to pay attention to something and when to dismiss it. Now here, I take a look at all these letters

I receive, and if something is serious, I give it my full attention; but many times is just a matter of temptation. Someone will show up at your door and say, "Just give me a couple of minutes" and keep you there for an hour. You may be sweating, standing in the cold and shivering, but he goes on and on telling you stories as if nothing is happening. Well, how can this be from God? Then you get sick and are unable to pray for others or for yourself, and you're rendered useless for days. Then someone comes by who is really in need of help and you are unable to provide it to him.

Concerning those who have a serious problem, it isn't enough just to listen to them, see that they're in pain and then simply tell them, "Here take an aspirin." For example, someone says, "I can only speak to you for a minute, because the bus is leaving," and he goes on to tell you of a serious matter. It is like someone having cancer and saying to the doctor, "Quick, do the surgery because my plane is leaving soon!" Each illness requires the appropriate amount of time. You have to see where it stems from, what the symptoms are, and so on. You cannot give makeshift solutions to a serious problem.

A novice monk approached me during the litany which is done on the Holy Mountain during Easter Week, just as we had begun to go uphill in the procession, and wanted me to tell him about mental prayer (the Jesus Prayer). He had come so many times to the *Kalyvi* before and never inquired about this, but there, as we were climbing the hill, he had the inspiration to ask about such a subtle subject! A subtle and serious subject is not discussed while trudging uphill – without careful thought.

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The Spiritual Father Determines How Often the Believer Receives Holy Communion

– Geronda, the Apostle Paul writes, *For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself.*[1] When is it that a person receives Holy Communion *unworthily*?

– Basically, we must be aware of our unworthiness when we partake of Holy Communion. Christ asks of us to be contrite, to have compunction and humility. When something disturbs our conscience, we must take care of it. If, for example, we have fought with someone, we must first be reconciled with him and then go and receive Holy Communion.

– Geronda, there are some people who, although they have a blessing from their Spiritual Father to receive Holy Communion, nevertheless hesitate to do so.

– One must not determine on his own whether he should or shouldn't receive Holy Communion. If someone does this, the devil will take advantage of it and open up a new battleground. We often imagine ourselves to be worthy when we are not. Sometimes, however, according to the law we are not worthy, but according to the spirit of the Holy Fathers we need to have the divine transfusion for our illness; we need divine consolation in our contrite repentance, since the enemy may attack us from the right and hurl us into despair.

– Then, Geronda, how often should one receive Holy Communion?

1. 1 Cor 11:29.

– How frequently one should receive Holy Communion and how long one should fast before Holy Communion cannot be given concrete answers. The Spiritual Father is the one who will determine with discernment how often one should receive Holy Communion and how much one should fast, according to each person's ability. At the same time, the Spiritual Father will also provide guidance in spiritual fasting, abstinence from the passions, all the while regulating this in accordance to each person's spiritual sensitivity; that is, according to the degree of each one's awareness of his fault, while also keeping in mind the harm that can be done by the devil when attacking a sensitive soul, so as to bring it to despair. For example, in carnal sins, for which the penance is abstention from Holy Communion for forty days, the devil can cause the soul to fall again in thirty-five days and, if a rule of forty days is given anew, the devil will make it a habit to attack the soul on a regular basis so as to confuse and render it hopeless. In such circumstances, the Spiritual Father may say after the first penance, "Look, be very careful for one week and then go and receive Holy Communion," and then he can receive Communion at every Divine Liturgy in order to strengthen the soul and put the devil behind him. Also, one who lives a spiritual and careful life will approach the Mystery as often as he feels Holy Communion to be a spiritual necessity and not a mere external habit; but this, too, must be done with the blessing of the Spiritual Father.

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The Use of Penances

– Geronda, does the precise observance of the commandments help us feel God near us?

– Which commandments? Those of the Mosaic Law?

– No, those of the Gospel.

– The observance of the commandments does help, but it must be a correct and proper observance, for it is actually possible to observe the commandments wrongly. Spiritual life requires divine righteousness, not a dry observance of the law. We see the discernment with which the Holy Fathers guided people even in the application of the Sacred Canons! Saint Basil the Great, the strictest Father of the Church who has written the most demanding canons, refers to a canon that applies to a particular sin, but then he himself adds, *Do not examine the time but the manner of repentance*.[2] In other words, if two people commit the same sin, the Spiritual Father may impose on one man the penance not to receive Holy Communion for two years, while on the other he may impose only two months. There can be that much of a difference!

– Does penance help one to cast out a passion?

– One must understand that penance is meant to help someone. Otherwise, what can one say? If you attempt to correct someone by physical punishment, you will accomplish nothing. If you try to correct someone by force, Christ will turn to you on Judgment Day and say, "Were you a Diocletian?" To the punished one He will

2. See Saint Basil the Great, *Letter 217*, par. 84, *PG* 32, 808B: "For we do not always judge such things by means of time, but observe rather the manner of the repentance." (By "time" Saint Basil means the imposed duration of penance.)

say, "What you achieved, you did so because you were forced to." We don't strangle someone in order to ensure Paradise for him; we try to help him seek some fruitful ascetic discipline for himself. He must come to the point of being joyful because he is living, and joyful because he is dying.

Penances are left up to the discernment of the Spiritual Father. The Spiritual Father must be uncompromisingly strict with him who sins callously. The one who is overcome by sin but who repents, becomes humble, and modestly asks for forgiveness, will be helped with discernment by his Spiritual Father to approach God again. This is what many of the Saints did. Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian as a Spiritual Father did not usually give the people penances. He tried to bring them to an awareness so that they themselves, out of *philotimo*, would choose to do some ascetic discipline or act of charity or other goodness. Whenever he observed a little child who was possessed or paralyzed and understood that the parents were the cause for the child's suffering, he would first heal the child and then impose a discipline on the parents to make them careful in the future.

Some people say, "Oh, this particular Spiritual Father is very patristic. He is very strict! He is smart, has a good memory, and knows the Pedalion[3] by heart." A Spiritual Father who applies precisely the rules contained in the Pedalion, however, may harm the Church. Does it do any

3. A collection of the Canons of the Orthodox Church, containing the Sacred Canons of the Oecumenical Councils, the Apostolic Canons, as well as the Canons of the Holy Fathers of the Church, with a brief interpretation. It was compiled in 1793 by Agapios the Priestmonk and Saint Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain.

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good when the Spiritual Father takes the Pedalion and begins: "What sin have you committed? This one. What is written here about it? This, many years abstention from Holy Communion for you! And what have you done? This. What is written here? This rule applies here!"

– So, Geronda, one must take into account dozens of things.

– Yes, especially in today's society, one cannot just go and apply the entire canonical tradition of the Church with blind, indiscreet austerity; he should cultivate a sense of *philotimo* in people. In order to be able to help other souls, the Spiritual Father must first do considerable work on himself; otherwise, he will go around breaking heads.

The Pedalion is called the *Rudder* because it guides man toward salvation, sometimes in one way and other times in another way, as the captain of the ship turns the rudder to the left or to the right in order to bring the ship to shore. If he were to navigate the ship in a straight line without turning when needed, he would bring it upon the rocks, sink it and everyone on board would drown. If the Spiritual Father uses the Canons of the Church as if they were ... loose military cannons – and not with discernment, in accordance with each person's needs and the repentance demonstrated – then instead of healing souls, he'll be committing a crime.

The Prayer of Absolution

Some Spiritual Fathers have a rule: When the penitent may not have a blessing to receive Holy Communion, they do not read the prayer of absolution. Others say, "It

is our trend not to read the prayer of absolution on every occasion." Such rules seem like a protestant thing to me... A young man who had fallen into certain sins came to my *Kalyvi*. He had gone and made his Confession, but the Spiritual Father did not read the prayer of absolution. The poor fellow was in despair. "If my Spiritual Father won't read the prayer of absolution, it means that even God doesn't forgive me," he thought and he was going to commit suicide. So I told him, "Go to your Spiritual Father, and ask him to read the prayer of absolution; if he refuses to, go to another Spiritual Father."

Without the prayer of absolution, the penitent will constantly experience one fall after another, because the devil has not lost his rights over the person. How can the person battle against evil if the devil still has a hold on him? He is not yet liberated; he is still under demonic influence. Whereas with the prayer of absolution, the demonic influences are driven out, the person regains the ground he had lost in the battle, and he, the poor one, is helped and enabled to continue his war against his passions.

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ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΟΥ ΣΤΙΣ ΨΥΧΕΣ

CHAPTER FOUR

The Work of the Spiritual Father Upon Souls

Handling the Soul Is Refined Work

Geronda, how can certain difficult and crabby characters be helped?

– As a carpenter, I used to work with warped boards. It took a lot of patience though, because warped and twisted wood is difficult to plane and straighten out. I would work it slowly, using the double-edge blade, and would eventually be able to straighten it out. Such boards actually turn out to be very lovely, because they have a beautiful grain and don't break easily; they are very strong. If you didn't know this, you could take a look at such boards before they are properly worked and just discard them. I want to say that some people who may appear to have a difficult character, actually may have within them such powers and potential that, if they allow themselves to be "worked on", can make great strides in the spiritual life; but not, of course, without dedicating a great deal of time and effort.

Also, I never used large nails to bind two warped boards together. First of all, I planned the boards and

straightened them out, and then I'd join them with small nails. I didn't force them together, because when warped boards are forced to join using large nails, they will split and separate, in which case nothing has been gained.

It takes a great degree of discernment when someone is dealing with human souls. In the spiritual life, there isn't only one recipe, one rule. Each and every soul has its own quality and its own capacity. There are vessels with great capacity and vessels with limited capacity. Some are made of plastic and are not very durable, others are made of metal and are very durable. When the Spiritual Father comes to know a soul's quality and capacity, he will act in accordance with the possibilities and the background available and with the progress already achieved. The behaviour of the Spiritual Father will be in accordance with the penitent's condition, the sin he has committed and many other factors. For example, to one who is impudent, the Spiritual Father will be careful not to give cause for more impudence. To the sensitive soul, he will look to see how to encourage him confront his problems in a courageous manner.

Also, care must be taken not to make assumptions based on a person's outward appearance. One must not believe too readily what others are saying in order to draw one's conclusions, especially if one does not have the gift of insight. Some wooden planks, while they may appear very strong externally, are all spongy and fibrous within. When the external roughness is planed off, then they reveal what they really are. Others again, while seemingly useless on the outside, are actually very strong and durable on the inside.

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The handling of the soul is a refined undertaking. Mistakes cannot be made in the recipe used. You see, each organism must be given that particular vitamin it lacks, and every illness requires the appropriate medication.

Let Us Not Provide False Ease to Others in Their Passions

– Geronda, when a woman tells us, "The Spiritual Father didn't understand me," what should we tell her?

– Tell her, "Could it be that you didn't make yourself clear? Could it be your fault?" In such cases, you should perturb those who complain; not excuse them too readily. However, these are very delicate and sensitive matters, because even Spiritual Fathers can become confused.

– What if she tells us that she is not comfortable with her Spiritual Father?

– Maybe she's also at fault if she's not comfortable; maybe she is seeking to be put at false ease by her Spiritual Father, wanting her own will to be granted. Let's say that someone is neglecting his family and is constantly arguing with his wife. He wants to divorce her and he comes to me to complain, demanding that I side with him, demanding that I bless him to dissolve his family! If I tell him, "This is all your fault" and he doesn't acknowledge his guilt, he will say that I didn't put him at ease. In other words, some people will say things like, "The Spiritual Father didn't put me at ease," because the Spiritual Father won't tell them what they want to hear.

If the Spiritual Father were to justify each person's passions, he would ease their consciences, but they wouldn't be helped spiritually. If we are to ease each

person's conscience in his passions, why not also put the devil at ease, why not also please the devil. For example, you come and tell me, "Sister so and so came and spoke to me in an insulting manner." And I say to you, "Well, don't pay any attention to her." This will put you at ease. Then after a while, that Sister comes and tells me something about you, "Sister so and so has done this and that." And I tell her, "Well, you know how she is! Don't take her too seriously." Now I have put her at ease also. This way I put everyone at ease, but I also mislead them! In actual fact, I should tell you, "Come now, if the Sister spoke like that to you, you must have done something to her." This will give you room to consider your guilt in the matter and to correct yourself. For from the moment you begin to realise your guilt, everything will get better. Real ease, real peace, comes when a person aligns himself with the Gospel and tries to live patristically.

The goal is how to be at peace in Paradise, and not how to be at peace on earth. There are some Spiritual Fathers who put the thoughts of others at ease, and then these persons exclaim, "The Spiritual Father has granted me a great degree of inner peace," but they, unfortunately, remain uncorrected. In fact, these Spiritual Fathers are supposed to help the person find his faults, help him correct these faults, and then guide him forward in his life. Only then does real peace come. Just putting someone at peace in his passions is of no help; for me this is a crime.

When the Spiritual Father is called on to help two people who are involved in a relationship, he must communicate with both. For instance, when he listens to the thoughts of two people who have differences, he must know both souls, for surely each person will present the

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situation as he understands it. And he should only agree to resolve their differences if they, too, agree to have them resolved according to the Gospel; for all the other solutions are nothing but a constant headache that will continuously require aspirins. Then he must put each one in his place; he must justify neither one. He must point out to each one his faults, bring each of them to an even keel; this is how they'll agree and come to an understanding.

The only good attribute I have is this: I never justify anyone, even when he is not at fault. When, for example, women come and tell me that they have problems in their family and that their husband is at fault, I scold the women. When the men come and complain about the women, I scold the men. I don't put their thoughts at ease, I don't ease their conscience, but instead I point out each person's faults and weaknesses. I say to each person whatever is needed in order for him to be helped. Otherwise, one will leave at peace, and the other will leave at peace, but at home they will start fighting again, "He was right when he told me this about you!" "And do you know what he said to me about you?" What I mean to say is that I never put anyone at ease with his passions. I often find it necessary to scold someone severely – for his own good, of course – but at least he goes away truly at peace with himself and with others. They may leave feeling that the medicine was somewhat bitter, but inside they understand that the medicine was more bitter for me than for them; and they feel the love that moved me to scold them.

– Geronda, some people gain a sense of safety when you scold them.

– Yes, because I don't scold someone drily, without explaining. I will point out to him his good qualities so that

he may develop them even further, as well as his faults that need to be corrected. But when you don't tell him the truth, there comes a point when he sees through the flattery and despairs.

Dealing With Cases of Despair

An agitated young man came and told me, "Geronda, I'm a hopeless case, I'm incorrigible. Even my Spiritual Father said, 'Such things are hereditary…'" He was overwhelmed by feelings of despair. When people tell me that they have problems, I tell them, "This happens for this and that reason; in order to change, you must do this and that." For example, someone has a certain thought that troubles him and he can't sleep; he takes pills for his head, his stomach, and he asks me, "Should I stop taking the pills?" "No, don't stop taking the pills," I tell him. "First get rid of the thoughts that trouble you and then you'll be able to get rid of the pills. If you don't reject those thoughts, you will continue to be tormented just the same." For what good would it do if he were to get rid of the pills while he still has the tormenting thoughts?

It is good if the Spiritual Father doesn't reach the point of giving up; he should be a little tolerant of the situation, but of course, the individual should work diligently to help himself. Once a young man got rough with his fiancée – who knows what he told her? – and she, with indignation, took the car, drove away, and on the highway got killed in an accident. Following this tragedy, the young man wanted to commit suicide because he felt responsible for his fiancée's death. When he came and told me this, even though he had done a terrible thing, actually a

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crime, I consoled him and brought him to his senses to stop him thinking about suicide. After that, however, he went to the other extreme and became totally indifferent, and in the meantime found another girlfriend. When he came to see me again after a couple of years, I needed to and was able to give him a very serious jolting, for there was no longer any danger of him committing suicide. The jolting was necessary in order to shake him out of his indifference and to make him face reality. "Don't you understand that you essentially committed murder, that you are the reason why the young woman was killed?" If he had worked correctly on himself, he would have continued to be troubled over the accident but would have received a measure of divine consolation; he would not have reached the state of irresponsible indifference.

These situations require a lot of attention and vigilance. Someone makes a mistake and falls into despair. You must console him right then and there, but in order to avoid further harm, he must also develop a sense of *philotimo*. Once a young man came to my *Kalyvi Panagouda* desperate because he'd become captive to carnal sin and could not be released from this passion. He had gone to two Spiritual Fathers who had attempted in a strict manner to help him realise how serious his passion was. In despair, the young man reasoned, "Since I know that what I am doing is a sin and I can't correct myself and stop doing it, I will just break with God." When I heard his problem, I felt his pain and told him, "Look, my good fellow, never start your struggle with the things you cannot do, but with the things you can do. Let's see what you can do, and let's start from there. Can you go to Church every Sunday?" "Yes, I can," he said. "Can you keep a

fast every Wednesday and Friday?" "I can." "Can you give away as charity one tenth of your salary, perhaps go to visit the sick and help them?" "I can." "Can you pray every night, even when you have sinned, and say, 'O Lord, my God, save my soul'?" "I will do it, Geronda," he assured me. So I told him, "Start doing today all the things you can, and the Almighty God will take care of the one thing you can't." The poor fellow became peaceful and constantly repeated, "Thank you, Father." He had *philotimo* and the Good God helped him.

Strictness Towards the Impudent, Leniency Towards the Philotimo-Filled Persons

If someone wants to live virtuously, but was not helped in childhood, it is not flattery to tell him the good qualities you see in him, because in this way he can be helped and changed, since he is entitled to divine help, not having received human help in his childhood. Once I told someone, "You are a good man. However, the things you do are unworthy of you." I told him this because I had noticed his good "field" and the "bad seed" he had planted in it. I noticed that inwardly he was indeed a good man and that whatever evil he did was external. I didn't tell him, "You are a good man," in order to flatter him; I said it in order to help him, to motivate his *philotimo*.

Some people have the following rule: Regardless of whether or not someone has a gift, they'll always say, "You have no gift," presumably to prevent the other person from being harmed by pride. In other words, everything is levelled. But when someone despairs of the evil

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he does and also despairs due to the false idea that he has nothing good and no gifts, how will he be encouraged to struggle willingly? In contrast, if you point out to him the good attributes he has and cultivate his sense of *philotimo* and nobility, he is helped, and he grows and makes spiritual progress.

Now, as a rule, when I see that someone has a gift or is making progress in his struggle, I will tell him so. And when I see someone getting out of line, oh, will I let him have it. I don't think he'll be harmed either way, because both contain love. If someone is harmed by my behaviour, this means he simply has a screw loose. For example, if the icon a Sister has painted is good, I'll tell her it's good. But if I see that she becomes proud and begins to be impudent, I'll put her in her place. Naturally, if she becomes proud, her icons will become caricatures, in which case she will suffer yet another blow. If she becomes humble again, she will resume her good work. I'm not pleased with sickly and superficial behaviours and stands. I can't stand disjointed and deformed things; I will keep adjusting them until they find their rightful place and form. Am I to encourage sickly, disjointed spiritual conditions?

– Geronda, how can you help an impudent person who becomes even more impudent from the attention you give him?

– Let me tell you. When I see that this person is not helped by my concern, my kindness and love, then I tell myself that I will have nothing to do with him, and force myself not to treat him with kindness. Normally, the more kindness is shown to you, the more you should be transformed with a broken and a contrite heart.

Here's what happened in the past with someone: in the beginning I was forced to relate to him certain divine events that I had experienced in order to help him. Instead of being deeply moved and saying with a contrite spirit, "O my God, what can I do to please you for this consolation?" he was emboldened and behaved with impudence. Then I took a very strict stand toward him, saying to myself, "I will help him from afar with my prayer." I decided to do this not because I didn't love him, but because this is what would help him.

– Geronda, what if he were to realise his mistake and ask for forgiveness?

– That would be good, we could then come to an understanding. Otherwise, if he is not helped by my *philotimo*, I will get no appropriate response and have no direct relationship with him. When the other person has devoutness, humility and no impudence, you, too, can act with simplicity. From the outset I treat everyone with ease and simplicity. I am not reserved, hoping thus to prevent others from being emboldened and thus harmed. I give myself wholly in order to help the other person reveal himself in a loving environment, and eventually I point out his faults. Depending on his age, I consider each person to be my brother, my father, my grandfather. I create sunshine in order to bring all the snakes, the scorpions, the beetles – the passions – out in the open, and then I help him to kill them off. But if I notice that he doesn't appreciate this and is not really helped by my behaviour but is instead exploiting my simplicity and true love and beginning to behave with impudence, then I gradually distance myself so that he does not become even more impudent.

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But in the beginning, I give myself wholly, and this is why I have a clear conscience.

Once in the Monastery of Stomion I had taken a young man in to help him learn to be a carpenter. I treated him with kindness and like a brother. But I began to notice certain things that were not good and I was not pleased with them. I asked him once, "What time is it?" And he replied, "The clock is going at the same pace as your mind!" Then I said to myself, "I can't continue this way. I will gradually hold back 'my mind' because he is not benefiting." Normally, if this person had some *philotimo*, he would have been deeply moved by the way I was treating him. But I saw that he could not fit in with me, he did not understand me. After that, he left on his own; I did not have to send him away. You see, tolerance and love make the impudent more impudent, and the *philotimo*-filled person have more *philotimo*.

Kindness Harms the Unrepentant

– Geronda, I remember once you scolded me very harshly.

– If need be, I will do it again, so we can all go together to Paradise. Now I will take draconian measures!... Look, I follow this rule: I try to help someone first to realise that he needs telling off and then I scold him. Am I not doing the right thing? Because I scold someone when I see him committing a serious sin, I become the bad guy. But what can I do? Should I put them at ease in their passion to be on good terms with them, and then we can all go to Hell together? My conscience never troubles me when I rebuke someone or make a remark that upsets him, because

I do it out of love for his spiritual benefit. I see that he does not understand how much he has grieved Christ with what he is doing, so I rebuke him. Of course, I am pained and my heart is broken and contrite at that time, but my conscience doesn't trouble me for having had to scold him. I can go and receive Holy Communion peacefully, without Confession. I feel a consolation, a joy inside. For me, consolation and joy is the salvation of the soul.

– Geronda, the thought occurs to me that you are consoling me, because either I cannot bear austerity, or you have often told me to do something and I did not do it, in which case you gave up on me.

– Blessed soul, do you think that I would play games with the salvation of your soul? Young persons rehearse. Adults have good judgment and proceed steadily. Rest assured; if I notice anything wrong from a distance or from nearby, I will tell you. You must have trust and be at peace. Oh, haven't you understood me? You think I'd put your thoughts at ease lightly? When I see a sensitive soul or one that is overcome by a profound awareness of his fault, what should I say? That's when I provide consolation, so that he doesn't despair. But when I see someone has a heart of stone, then I speak sternly to shake him up. If someone is heading towards a cliff and I tell him, "Go on, you are on track," am I not committing a crime? The bad thing with some people is that they don't believe you when you tell them not to worry, and they continue to be tormented. But if I see something evil, how can I not speak out? How can you allow someone to go to Hell? When you have a sense of responsibility, you speak out whenever necessary. For me personally, it is easier to be silent, but I can't when I am responsible.

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Also, one must be careful of the following: Let's say you do something bad to me; I forgive you. You do something bad to me again, and again I forgive you. I am all right; my conscience is clear; but if you do not correct yourself because I keep forgiving you, this becomes very serious. It is quite another matter if you are incapable of being corrected completely. But you must try to correct yourself, as much as you can. Don't ease your conscience by saying, "As long as he's forgiving me, I am all right; it's not on my conscience; who cares; no worries." Someone may have made a mistake, but he repents, he weeps, with pain in his heart he asks for forgiveness and continues the struggle to correct and improve himself. In this case, there is awareness, acknowledgement of the fault, and the Spiritual Father must forgive him. However if he does not repent, but continues in his old ways, the Spiritual Father who has responsibility for his soul cannot just sit back and smile. Kindness is harmful to the unrepentant.

Respect For the Freedom of Others

– Geronda, is it possible for someone to purposefully hide a sin from his Spiritual Father?

– Yes, but even if the Spiritual Father knows of this hidden sin or understands something, it is not to his advantage to speak up, nor will it benefit the penitent to be told. I often see something in a person's struggle, I surmise or know what has been done, but out of respect, I say nothing, unless that person reveals it himself. I consider it to be a matter of compulsion, of dishonour, if I tell him when he himself does not wish to reveal it. It is a delicate

matter; you don't want to disgrace him. You don't want to force someone like that; there should be freedom of will. But if I see that he might be in danger and there is no other way to help him, or that he is ignorant of the danger and will come a cropper and be destroyed, then I will find a way to say something to him.

It is better to give the other person the chance to understand his fall, when he asks to know, and let him on his own attack his old self, for he will experience less pain this way. You see, even a small child, when it falls down on its own, will cry less than it would if it had been pushed by another child. For someone to advise someone else to do something, the one who receives the advice must be humble, while the advice-giver must be ten times more humble and try to apply the same advice to himself. I myself should be able to personally exert greater effort than what I'm asking for from the one I'm giving advice to; and even then I will think twice about whether or not to give the advice.

Of course, correction should always be given to a person who you know and is close to you. The Spiritual Father will see what rights have been given to him by the other person and what responsibility he bears for him, and will act accordingly. When he has assumed the responsibility for the soul, then he is obliged to censure, but naturally with discernment. It does not help, however, to play the role of teacher and to censure another person if he has not given you the right. It is like someone coming into my cell and shifting my things around, putting my vigil lamp here, my bed there, and hanging my *komboschoini* elsewhere, without asking me.

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The Spiritual Father's Love For the Penitent Who Confesses

The grace-filled Spiritual Father loves and feels pain for the soul, because he knows its great value. He helps it in repentance, he lightens its burden through confession, he liberates it from anxiety and guides it into Paradise. The confessor is called "Father"; he must try to be a true father, admonishing with divine love and affection. He must put himself in the place of each person who comes for confession and be able to experience his pain, so the penitent can see his own pain reflected in the face of his Spiritual Father. This is particularly needed in our present time, where people are in need of some refreshing water, not strong vinegar. Most people today, being under the attack of demonic influences, find it difficult to accept spiritual advice or a remark. This is why even the scolding must be handed out with love; point out the person's fault discreetly with smile or a joke.

Love can be sensed, while the passions of the soul betray the person. When there is no love, the critical remark may be made in an outwardly polite manner, but the other reacts badly when he detects only the human element in our behaviour. Whereas, when the scolding is handed out with pain and love, the other person may feel pain on the surface, but in the depths of his soul, he is not wounded, because he is aware of the presence of love. I know a Spiritual Father who is particularly stout – of course it is his body type, but it may also be that he is not very careful with what he eats – but do you know how much pain he feels for others, how much he cares and is concerned for those who are suffering? He has humility,

admitting that he is not an ascetic, but at the same time he also has boundless kindness; and many find more true comfort and peace with this stout Spiritual Father than they do with many an ascetic one.

A Spiritual Father who is not willing to even enter Hell out of love for his spiritual children is no Spiritual Father.

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